

WESTMINSTER SENIOR CITIZENS' FORUM

On Friday 24 February I met up with key members of the Westminster Senior Citizens' Forum at a meeting arranged by the group's Chairman, Peter Russell.

Discussion covered a range of issues relating to older people living in "ordinary" housing and some more specific points about specialist accommodation designed for older people.

1. General housing issues

a) Social and Ethnic mix

Westminster has seen a continuing inflow of people from other countries with some of the tensions this can inevitably bring. Although the City has seen many waves of immigrants – from the Welsh before the last War to the Irish immediately afterwards, through to affluent families from the Middle East and very poor refugees in recent years – there are dangers of offending long-standing residents if a concentration of newcomers appears threatening or preferential treatment appears to be given to these households.

History suggests that different waves of new people settle in due course and Londoners are very tolerant of different cultures in their midst but sensitivity is required by all public authorities to prevent unnecessary hostility on either side. This sensitivity must relate to the placing of one household next to another, avoiding allocations – eg allocating a relatively small flat to a relatively large family next door to an elderly person in a converted house.

b) Noise

Probably the most frequent cause of friction between neighbours comes from the transmission of noise. Although this is most commonly a problem in houses converted into flats, noise could be a problem even in tower blocks with concrete floors. In some cases, the problem was "family gatherings"; late-night parties and even meetings of community groups could create problems of noise.

At least one housing association was praised for installing false ceilings in converted houses where this problem was prevalent. In other cases, it was suggested that the fashion of bare floorboards

might be discouraged with help for carpeting and underlay. There was also a need for education to achieve a better understanding of the nuisance caused by noise, particularly to older people.

Should the government's Decent Homes Standard give greater attention to adequate noise insulation when properties are improved?

c) Standards of housing management

A range of problems have been encountered in terms of the service provided to tenants. Sometimes transfer arrangements were so bureaucratic that moving existing residents into smaller accommodation, and freeing up larger homes, proved too problematic; sometimes practical maintenance was not being well handled. In particular, the absence of a good Complaints Procedure can leave tenants very dissatisfied.

Residents look to Westminster City Council to ensure high standards wherever ex-Council estates were involved: good practice should also be required of housing associations in relation to their own property holdings.

d) Lifts

It was noted that lifts in a large number of tower blocks were now coming to the end of their useful lives. Breakdowns were more frequent and it was becoming difficult to obtain the necessary spare parts (which, today, need to be in metric measurements or they have to be made to order). This problem, of course, means that elderly people are finding themselves housebound on higher floors – sometimes for many days – while lifts are repaired. And the problem seems likely to get much worse.

Rather than handle these repairs in a piecemeal way – with individual orders being placed with American companies for specific replacement parts – it would seem worth organising a comprehensive survey of the existing position, mapping what kinds of lift need attention, where a more strategic approach to sorting out a looming hazard could be cost effective.

e) Sales by housing associations

Offence has been caused by the sale of precious social housing for up-market owner occupation. While there may be good reasons for maximising gains from sales – eg to achieve the Decent Homes

Standards for which no public funding is available from elsewhere – housing associations need to understand that such action can give them a bad name.

2. Specialist housing

The report from Ridgeway Associates spelt out the problems in relation to accommodation specifically designed for older people. There was agreement at the meeting that comments about the proportion of bed-sits, and of one-bedroom flats, were accurate. It was noted that some of these small flats were being used to house younger people, including those with severe alcohol problems, because older people would not accept them.

It was also explained that a number of providers – including reputable housing associations – were shedding their caretakers / wardens / support officers, in order to save management costs. This was removing a well-regarded aspect of sheltered housing provision which was of growing importance now that those moving in were older and frailer than in times past.

Particular problems were noted with the very large specialist developments for older people which were now in need of upgrading.

Broadly, the recommendations for a strategy to bring the City’s specialist accommodation for older people were accepted by members of the Forum. Action will cost money over the years ahead but the option of leaving current accommodation as it is will not be tenable.

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I was extremely grateful to members of the Forum for coming together and sharing their direct experiences of the issues they face. All those attending the discussion participated fully and I must underline my thanks for this extremely valuable session. Relevant ingredients will be incorporated in a forthcoming draft report for the Commission.

RICHARD BEST
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